



## **Ethics and the New Testament: A Survey of Perspectives 1970-1980**

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In the long and twisted story of the use and abuse of the New Testament writings for moral and ethical guidance, the past decade may eventually serve as a model of conflict and confusion. In these years we have witnessed nearly the full gamut of interpretations: from a scholarly appraisal that the ethical teachings of the New Testament are irrevocably dated to their own time and place to neo-evangelicals and aggressive fundamentalists using a literalist approach to *certain* New Testament issues as the watchword for political campaigns and religious controversy. As a result, sensitive pastors, lay persons, and students ask, “If the New Testament is in any way authoritative Scripture for us, then how *does* it apply to the controversies that swirl around us?” It may often seem that such a practical question never occurs to the critical specialists to whom we would turn for an answer. But it does occur to them, as the dozens of articles and books for the past decade alone vividly testify. The problems for contemporary application of the New Testament materials to present concerns are enormous, and that fact itself produces much of our anxiety and our division.

In 1970 James Gustafson wrote in an article that “the principal problem is to determine how decisive the authority of Scripture is for one’s moral judgment.”<sup>1</sup> A decade of writing on the subject has not changed that fact. Nor has it altered the corollary problem that, even if one decides to grant the New Testament enormous authority, “the existence of a variety of materials in Scripture necessitates some general principle for clarifying a more coherent and simpler view of the message of Scripture.”<sup>2</sup> Nowhere is that more true than in the practical application of New Testament ethical injunctions. For the fact is that virtually any specific New Testament assertion from one document or even within a document has its counterpart somewhere else. So, as long as the New Testament is important to any of us, and as long as moral and ethical issues are important to us, the debate must proceed.

<sup>1</sup>James Gustafson, “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics,” *Interpretation* 24 (1970) 430-455. The quotation is from p. 430.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 439.

The best illustration of the discussion in our past decade involves the validity and application of the “love command” in the New Testament. Everyone knows that it is there (in Matt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; and Rom 13:9). But is the command to love God and neighbor a rule which takes precedence over all others? Or is it one among many? Or is it a command anchored in a first century apocalyptic view of history and—consequently—now irrelevant? These alternatives represent the poles of current interpretation.

Jack T. Sanders in his *Ethics in the New Testament*<sup>3</sup> has argued that for Jesus, Paul, and the gospel writers the command to love is so inherently anchored in the expectation of the imminent end of the age and of God's final victory that the failure of that expectation renders the call to love meaningless. Moreover, according to Sanders, the other New Testament ethical statements turn out to be, on close examination, no more than adaptations of prevalent Jewish or Greco-Roman maxims and principles. On such a view, whatever value the New Testament may otherwise have, it does not present us with a viable ethic for today. Sanders wrote in conclusion, "Amidst the ethical dilemmas which confront us, we are now at least relieved of the need or temptation to begin with Jesus, or the early church, or the New Testament if we wish to develop coherent ethical positions."<sup>4</sup>

As he expected, Sanders' proposal has received little support from other New Testament critics (at least in print), and a great deal of opposition has been generated. In both *The Love Command in the New Testament* and in *The Moral Teachings of Paul* Victor Paul Furnish has staked out a starkly opposite position.<sup>5</sup> He sees in the dominance of the love command in the New Testament precisely the kind of center of which Gustafson spoke. Furnish argues that while Paul and Jesus are certainly futuristic in their eschatological outlook, it is precisely their application of love as the demand of the present which makes their ethics unique. It is this stress on the love command which distinguishes Jesus and Paul from fellow apocalypticists like the Qumran Essenes or even the judgmental author of the book of Revelation. So Furnish, and a number of other authors (cf. Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *The Bible and Ethics in Christian Life*<sup>6</sup>), disagree fundamentally with Sanders on the issue of the applicability of the love command to contemporary ethical thought.

Another response to the Sanders critique of New Testament ethics may be found in essays by Leander Keck and Georg Strecker, and it is implicit in Paul Minear's *Commands of Christ*.<sup>7</sup> Keck, in "Justification of the Ungodly and Ethics," attempts to follow Paul's logic about ethics in Romans as the way toward understanding our problem.<sup>8</sup> As a result, he argues that Paul's use of the love ethic stems not from a search for a normative good or right principle, but from a belief

<sup>3</sup>Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>5</sup>Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) and *The Moral Teachings of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>6</sup>Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Bible and Ethics in Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976).

<sup>7</sup>Paul Minear, *Commands of Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972).

<sup>8</sup>Leander Keck, "Justification of the Ungodly and Ethics," *Rechtfertigung* (Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann), ed. J. Friedrich, W. Pohlmann, and P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976) 199-209.

that God by raising Jesus has changed the status of the doer instead of the status of the deed. Thus Keck wishes to ground ethics not in a transcendent love or in a universal good but instead in God before whom all deeds are done and who reveals himself precisely in love which justifies the ungodly. In somewhat similar fashion, both Minear in *Commands of Christ* and Strecker in "Strukturen einer neutestamentlicher Ethik"<sup>9</sup> make the Christ event, as incarnation on the one hand and as cross-resurrection on the other, the indispensable key to a New Testament and Christian understanding of ethics. Unlike Keck's closely reasoned treatment, however, both are

disappointingly unclear as to why that event is pivotal for ethics. And Minear is less than rigorous in separating Jesus tradition from that of Torah-pious Christian Judaism. Strecker does make the intriguing assertion that a “Jesus-to-Paul-to-the-Synoptists” development is a false development for New Testament ethics, and that the correct sequence is one which begins from Paul and works forward and back. In any case, these writers represent an alternative to both an *agape* centered ethic and to sweeping skepticism by arguing for a kerygma centered ethic which roots the ethical life of the believer in the saving action of a God who graces the sinner. Given that faith experience, a response of grateful, obedient and *agape*-filled life must flow.

One other approach to New Testament ethics in general deserves mention, although it disavows the sharp debate prompted by Sanders’ approach. J. L. Houlden in *Ethics in the New Testament*<sup>10</sup> and B. Lindars in “The Bible and Christian Ethics”<sup>11</sup> might be said to represent a more eclectic approach. Here one starts from a recognition of the historic place that the New Testament has held in Christian thought and life, then grants that much of the New Testament material is shaped by its eschatology and its cultural setting, and finally makes a judgment about what remains valid for a person who, before God, has the full moral responsibility to make exactly that decision. In this conception, as in Gustafson’s approach, the New Testament is an important component in ethical decision making but by no means a sole or strictly definitive component.

When one moves beyond the general question of the bases of a New Testament ethic to a specific consideration of ethical issues, the literature multiplies dramatically. Space allows us to comment on only two of these areas: the New Testament and revolution/liberation, and the New Testament and issues related to sexuality.

Much has been made, especially in the early ’70s, of the case for a Christian ethic in support of the poor and the oppressed. In fact, one may quite fairly say that the general movement known as liberation theology is inevitably an ethical theology. In the works of G. Gutierrez, R. Ruether, J. Cone, R. McAfee Brown, and F. Herzog a strong case is made that the gospel is unashamedly a gospel for the poor and the oppressed here and now. And virtually no one who knows the biblical material will deny that such a stress is present, although the early Christian expectation of the consummation of history did *not* make them social activists in the Roman Empire.

<sup>9</sup>G. Strecker, “Strukturen einer neutestamentlicher Ethik,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 75 No.2 (1978) 139-146.

<sup>10</sup>L. Houlden, *Ethics in the New Testament* (3rd. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University, 1977).

<sup>11</sup>B. Lindars, “The Bible and Christian Ethics,” *Theologian* 76 (1973) 180-189.

The most direct controversy, however, in respect to New Testament traditions, has resulted from the revival of the old thesis that Jesus had been a Zealot, sympathizer, and that this feature of his activity has been deliberately disguised by his later followers to avoid conflicts with civil authorities. That assertion (or reassertion, since it goes back at least as far as Reimarus in the late 1800s) has prompted a number of critical responses. George Edwards in his *Jesus and the Politics of Violence*<sup>12</sup> and Martin Hengel in his *Was Jesus a Revolutionist*,<sup>13</sup> among others, have shown conclusively that the case for any pro-Zealot activity on Jesus’ part is extremely weak, and that the most one can say, and should say, is that Jesus’ radical view of the coming

reign of God was and is a revolutionary viewpoint, but that Jesus and the earliest church disdained any violent means of achieving the peace that God would bring. Thus the New Testament does give some comfort to the liberationist, but not to advocates of violent revolution, and some comfort to the pacifist, but none to the complacent and reactionary.

Another major focus of controversy that engulfs the New Testament in our time is the whole range of problems related to sexuality and sexual ethics. Abortion, the “new morality,” homosexuality, equal rights and ordination for women, and divorce are all center stage in our culture. So it is no surprise that attention has been given to the New Testament comments on these subjects. Jesus’ attitude toward women has been explored in many books and articles, notably L. Swidler, “Jesus Was a Feminist”<sup>14</sup> and Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus According to a Woman*.<sup>15</sup> William Phipps even raised the question *Was Jesus Married?* in a 1970 work, but his attempt to raise the issue of Jesus’ full sexual humanity is done in a polemical and uncritical way.<sup>16</sup>

Paul’s view on the role of women and on sexuality has also been a recent storm center. One level of the controversy has been over the Pauline authorship of the passages which advocate the subjugation of women. The debate seems to have been triggered primarily by an article by William O. Walker, “I Cor 11:2-16 and Paul’s Views Regarding Women,” in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 1975, and the continuing series of responses have carried on the discussion in both that journal and *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.<sup>17</sup> The critical consensus seems to be mounting that all of the anti-feminine passages, even 1 Cor 11:3-16, are non-Pauline interpolations, but that the harsh passages are still part of the canon, and so must be reckoned with. That storm has not only affected the Episcopal, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic controversies over the ordination of women, but is beginning to have an effect among “evangelicals” as well. Robin Scroggs in a series of articles and in *Paul for a New Day*<sup>18</sup> has advocated the necessity of understanding all of these texts, even if by Paul, in the context of the cultural limitations of the first century. And the articulate evangelical scholar Paul Jewett has written

<sup>12</sup>George Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>13</sup>Martin Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

<sup>14</sup>Leonard Swidler, “Jesus Was a Feminist,” *Catholic World* 212 (1971) 177-183.

<sup>15</sup>Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus According to a Woman* (New York: Paulist, 1975).

<sup>16</sup>William Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

<sup>17</sup>William O. Walker, “I Cor 11:2-16 and Paul’s Views Regarding Women,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975) 94-108.

<sup>18</sup>Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

*The Ordination of Women*<sup>19</sup> in which he argues that there is no genuine New Testament basis for anything other than the full, unequivocal equality of men and women in the church. Undoubtedly this heated discussion will continue in the decade of the ’80s.

The other issues of sexual relationships which trouble our times have also prompted renewed attention to the related New Testament passages. An excellent article by Bruce Vawter, “Divorce and the New Testament,” sets a new guidepost for further discussion and shows that the long suspect Matthean version of the divorce prohibition (19:3-9; 5:31-32) may well be the earliest and probably is the only one credible in a Palestinian environment.<sup>20</sup> The problems of an

application of that teaching in today's world are carefully explored in Myrna and Robert Kysar's *The Asundered: Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage*.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps, however, it is symptomatic of the problems of cultural transition that the other issues of sexual morality have received either rather literalistic application, as in G. L. Bahnsen, *Homosexuality: a Biblical View*,<sup>22</sup> or a culture-relevant reinterpretation. Indeed, the two most important books on Christian sexual ethics—*Embodiment* by James B. Nelson,<sup>23</sup> and the Catholic Theological Society report *Human Sexuality*,<sup>24</sup> though motivated by a clearly Christian and scriptural theology—can find little in specifics that carries over from the New Testament to our day on this question. The controversies over a livable Christian sexual ethics are sure to engage our churches and biblical interpreters for some time to come.

Thus when one surveys the treatment of issues in New Testament ethics over the past ten years, a perennial fact emerges. The fundamental issues still revolve around the prior perception of the role and authority of the Bible, and around one's judgment of the conflict between a reward/punishment versus a loved/grateful response point of departure. Moreover, now as always, the New Testament is drawn into the center of debates which were not at center focus in its world; debates such as, liberation of oppressed peoples, gay rights, abortion, and equal rights for women. So it may be just as important, as many of our authors note, to know what the New Testament does *not* say, and to be aware of how much ethical decision is inevitably, and quite properly, left to the responsible modern Christian as our task for our time.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Paul Jewett, *The Ordination of Women* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>20</sup>Bruce Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977) 528-542.

<sup>21</sup>Myrna and Robert Kysar, *The Asundered: Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978).

<sup>22</sup>G. L. Bahnsen, *Homosexuality: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

<sup>23</sup>James B. Nelson, *Embodiment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).

<sup>24</sup>*Human Sexuality*, a report by the Catholic Theological Society (New York: Paulist, 1977).

<sup>25</sup>For a broader and more specific bibliographical article of much of the decade's material, see the bibliographical article by Allen Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," *Religious Studies Review* 4 (1978) 28-36.